

SCOTTISH
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Increasing access through interpretation

a closer look

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The Scottish Museums Council is the national agency for central government support to Scotland's local museums and galleries.

SMC's mission is to improve the quality of museum and gallery provision in Scotland for the public benefit.

SMC combines strategic leadership for the sector, developing national policies and initiatives, with practical advice and services for members.

Interpret Scotland

Interpret Scotland is an inter-agency initiative that seeks to

- improve the quality and quantity of interpretation in Scotland
- promote the coordination of interpretation at local and strategic level
- share resources, expertise and experience to avoid duplicating effort.

This publication is the result of SMC and Interpret Scotland working together in partnership.

Every museum has collections. Every museum has visitors. What happens when these two meet is at the very heart of why we have museums. Interpretation is the way that museums try to make the most of this meeting, to make it as stimulating, rewarding and memorable as possible.

What does interpretation do for you and your visitors?

For many people who work in museums, interpretation is one of the most fulfilling aspects of their job. It is a chance to share with the audience their personal enthusiasm for museums and their collections. More fundamentally, interpretation is an essential part of a museum's public responsibilities.

These practical guidelines have been produced to support the Scottish Museums Council's policy statement, *Museums and Social Justice*. The notion of social justice asserts that people have a right of access to the collections and to associated information that museums hold on their behalf. Whichever way you look at the issue of access - from the perspective of the museum or that of your visitor - interpretation is a vital part of the work of museums in making their collections more accessible.



Interpretation making the most of your museum

Interpretation - and the intellectual access it provides - underpins many of the core aims of museums:

- Interpretation supports the educational and social purpose of the museum. It helps people from all parts of society to connect with the content of the museum.
- In a tourism and economic context, good interpretation provides visitors with an insightful and enjoyable experience that offers good value for the time and money they spend visiting the museum.
- Through interpreting effectively for all their visitors, museums generate public support for their long-term work to collect, document and conserve our heritage.
- Interpretation promotes support among governing bodies. Trustees and politicians respond, just like other people, to the interpretation you provide. They see the public responding to it too.

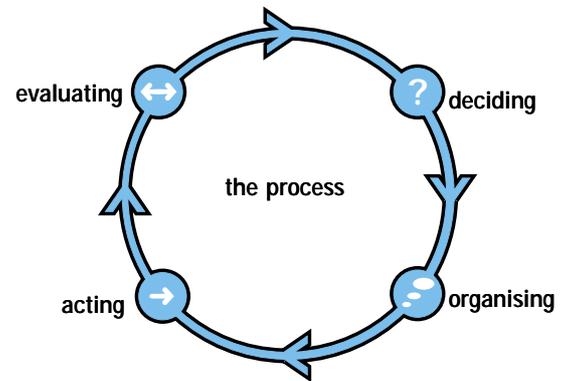
So, interpretation can do a lot for your museum. But to see the real value of interpretation, you have to turn this question on its head: what does interpretation do for your visitors? There are many answers - both simple and profound - to this question:

- they find it easy to make sense of what they are looking at
- their curiosity is stimulated
- they become absorbed
- their eyes are opened to something new
- they reflect on something that is important to them
- they have an insight into the place they have travelled to visit
- they feel a little closer to, or understand their differences to, their friends, family or ancestors
- they understand why these objects are in the museum
- they come away feeling inspired and alive to the world
- they want to come back.

These guidelines describe ways of thinking that can help you generate these types of response among your audiences. The approaches we describe are not a science. The 'rules' can be broken and you may still produce interesting, effective ways of connecting with your visitors.

The aim of these guidelines is to increase your chances of producing interpretation that works for you and your visitors. The guidelines focus on four areas:

- ? Deciding your Approach**
To start, we make clear what interpretation is, what makes it special as a type of communication, and some of the different forms it can take.
- 👁️ Thinking it Through**
This section looks at ways of organising your thinking so that you are clear about what you are trying to do with a specific piece of interpretation.
- ➡️ Making it Happen**
This section has some simple ideas for putting your thinking into practice. These ideas can be applied equally well to many types of interpretive media.
- ↔️ Looking Back, Looking Forward**
We outline why evaluation of interpretation is important and how to think about doing it.



Background

What is interpretation?

Museums interpret their collections and subjects in many different ways. Interpretation is perhaps most easily recognised in the various physical forms it takes, from guided tours and demonstrations, to computers and audio-visual shows. But really, interpretation is about communicating with the people who come into your museum (or those who you go out to visit). It is about intangibles: ideas, beliefs, understanding, opinions and emotions.

There is a long, and growing, list of interpretive media in museums. We have provided a list later in these guidelines. These media tend to share two important features that, taken together, distinguish interpretation from other types of communication:

- Generally speaking, visitors use interpretation in museums voluntarily. In this way, interpretation differs from formal education, where there is a greater expectation on the learner to stick with the materials or activities they are given as part of their course. With interpretation, people are free to ignore or walk away from the media if they choose.
- Interpretation is usually specific to its setting. Most interpretation is designed for a specific museum or exhibition area. Often, the interpretation is communicating about something in the museum, such as the collections or the building.

These two features distinguish interpretation from most other media such as books or films. They require a special approach. These guidelines focus on ways of getting this right.



Deciding your Approach

Two types of interpretation

Despite the huge range of interpretive media, they mostly try to communicate with visitors in two main ways (or a combination of the two). Whatever interpretation you develop, it is likely to be a variation of these two main approaches. It is therefore worth understanding what they are so that you can make a positive choice about which suits your situation and you can develop your interpretation with a sense of purpose.



Conveying ideas

The first approach is concerned, primarily, with conveying ideas clearly and effectively. Two American interpreters, Sam Ham and John Veverka, have come up with useful approaches when there is something very specific that you would like to convey - but you cannot quite put your finger on it! The exercises they suggest help you to clarify your message so that it comes through clearly and concisely in the informal learning setting of a museum. They help you to home in on the key ideas that are central to the interpretation.

Thinking thematically and with clear objectives encourages you not just to consider the key factual content of the interpretation but also the important sentiments and feelings. What is the spirit of what you are trying to convey? Does the subject evoke a sense of grief, joy, serenity, despair or exhilaration? If so, put it in your theme. In general, museums can be effective at communicating these emotions: long arguments and lots of details can often be better covered in books, CDs, websites and television programmes.

Encouraging exploration

The second approach is to give visitors a chance to explore evidence so that they can develop their own response to the subject. This type of learning places a greater emphasis on the opportunity for the learner to apply and develop skills - such as observation or problem solving - to the subject matter. In young children, this is called play. Given the right encouragement, people of all ages and backgrounds can become absorbed in this type of activity in the informal setting of a museum.

A simple example is the chance to sift through a set of archive photos, whether in a folder or on a computer. In some situations, the exploration might be of differing points of view or opinion. This approach often works well when the subject matter has been researched through oral history, but it can be used more widely too. Interpretation that encourages exploration is about creating new opportunities for different types of visitor to become enthusiastically immersed in the contents of the museum.

How to choose?

Which of these approaches, or what combination of them, should you use? They can both be very effective and successful. The answer depends on your situation and on what you are trying to do. The next section of these guidelines is about helping you to understand your situation, so that you can make an informed choice about the type of interpretation you want to produce.



Thinking it Through

Deciding where you are going

Interpretation is about ideas and it helps to start by getting your own thinking straight. This section describes a simple but well-established way of helping to clarify the sort of interpretation you need to produce. This process, often called interpretive planning, is widely used by organisations involved in interpreting countryside and historic sites. The same key steps can be applied at many levels within museum work, from the planning of an entire museum to the preparation of something as specific as, say, a guided tour.

key questions

why
are you doing this - what are your aims?

what
is your subject matter?

who
is it for - who are your audiences?

how
will you develop your media?

how well
does it work?

There is nothing very remarkable about these questions. Many people will naturally ask themselves these, or similar, questions before they develop a piece of interpretation. It is useful, however, to recognise this 'thinking work' as a discrete part of producing interpretation. Give yourself time to dwell on these questions and find your answers. Interpretation is about intangibles - ideas, perceptions and opinions - and, if you want your visitors to engage with these, you need to spend some time on them yourself. Addressing these questions allows you to give some thought to your interpretation without thinking about what physical form it might take or what space it might occupy. These matters can come later, when you are clear what the interpretation should be achieving.

It is worth writing down your answers and decisions to each of the questions. This can become your anchor, reminding you of your original intentions. It can help when, at a later stage, you are debating (with colleagues or yourself) the merits of any particular idea for the interpretation.

There are no rules about how you answer each question nor indeed how much time and effort you spend looking for the right answer. You do not need to slavishly follow the route that emerges from this process. Indeed, not everyone likes to work this way. Some people have a strong intuitive sense for what their interpretation should be. They like to create something, then mould it into the right shape. If you work this way, the interpretive planning questions can still be valuable. They can help you to review your work to assess whether your intuition is taking you down the right path. If you find you have come up with an idea that does not fit with your own reasoning, you need to question whether it really is such a good idea.



we should inspire our visitors' interest
rather than expect it

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What are your aims?

All interpretation aims to communicate. But why do you want to communicate? This question is likely to take you straight to your museum's policies and priorities. Here are some reasons why museums communicate with visitors:

- to support formal education and lifelong learning
- to promote awareness of the collections
- to encourage community pride, regeneration and participation
- to reach new audiences
- to support tourism
- to provide value for money for visitors.

Whilst these issues may seem, initially, remote from the production of a specific piece of interpretation, they can influence how you answer other questions in the interpretive planning process and ultimately have a bearing on the interpretation itself.

eg

Museum A

In our first example, a museum discovers that the local enterprise organisation is trying to increase entrepreneurial activity among young women. The museum decides that a key aim of its next interpretive project is to provide opportunities for young women to demonstrate enterprise and initiative. →

Museum B

For the second example, a museum finds that the local authority has a priority to promote strong communities. The museum takes this on as the aim for its summer programme. → →

What is your subject?

To produce a piece of interpretation you must define your subject matter and research it. It can happen the other way round too: you carry out wide ranging research to look for interesting topics or stories for interpretation. Larger museums may have their own research libraries. But it is quite common to find that, once you narrow your focus to a local subject, there is very little published information. Research therefore often brings together evidence from many different sources.

An important decision for a museum is whether its interpretation will focus on a subject area or on its collection. The difference may seem subtle but can be quite significant. Interpretation that addresses a subject area, such as 'wash days', might look at the social importance of this activity. Interpretation that focuses on interpreting a 'washing board' might focus on the physical effort of using that particular item. The different starting point can take the interpretation in different directions. There is no right or wrong approach. But it is worth bearing in mind that objects make museums unique. If the interpretation focuses mostly on subjects that could be dealt with by other media, then you may be missing a trick in the extremely competitive world of modern media.



Either way, you can arrive at one of the most difficult stages of interpretation - a lot of information and a difficult choice about what to interpret. You must find a way to make sense of all the research. Many - though not all - people working in museums have been trained by our education system to research and write essays. These research skills can be very valuable for preparing interpretation. The skill of writing a 2,000 word essay, however, can actually hinder the thinking needed to develop interpretive media.

In fact, it is extremely difficult to make sense of what to do with your research, without thinking about the third question in the interpretive planning process: who is your audience?

eg

→ Museum A

The museum decides that it wants its collections to be used as the starting point for the innovation and creativity. →

→ → Museum B

The museum knows that its best record of the local community is its photographic archive, which documents all the key events in the community's history over the last 100 years. → →

Who is your audience?

It is a simple rule of communication that you should know your audience. What does 'knowing your audience' mean when you are creating interpretation? It means knowing how people relate to your subject matter and the ideas they bring with them to the museum.

There are several dimensions to consider:

- interest - what objects, subjects, issues are your audience interested in?
- understanding - what understanding or perceptions do they have?
- attitudes and values - what attitudes or values underpin how visitors relate to the subject?
- experience - what experiences may they have that are associated with the subject?

Gathering this information helps build up a picture of the people you are addressing. Above all, avoid the image of your visitor as a "blank sheet" waiting to be filled in.

Your interpretation will be effective when it touches something inside them and you have to find out what that might be. Indeed, it is arguable that museums should be as well-informed about their audiences as they are about their collections.

Of course, each visitor is an individual and would probably like, in an ideal world, the interpretation to be tailored to their personal interests and needs. In practice, however, you will need to identify traits and characteristics that are shared by your audience, or groups within your audience. This will enable you to communicate with as many of them as you can, as effectively as you can.



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Your visitors may come as a family on a day out; as tourists seeking understanding of the area they are visiting; or as regular visitors with an interest in their local area. It is a challenge for museums to meet the differing expectations of these audiences through a range of services, including interpretation. It is relatively easy to recognise that these different categories of visitor exist.

The critical point for your interpretation is to understand how these differences affect the dimensions listed above - their interests, understanding, attitudes and experiences in relation to the subject you are interpreting.

Defining your target audiences and understanding their needs is essential if your museum is to broaden access to all groups in society. Without giving thorough attention to this aspect of interpretation, it is unlikely that you will be able to make the content of your museum attractive and relevant to people who, at the moment, do not visit. Giving serious consideration to what different groups would like from your interpretation is one of the most effective steps you can take towards being a fully inclusive museum.

There are many ways to gather this sort of information.

All research takes time or money. Again, there are no rules about how much effort you should put into this aspect of interpretation. But one sound piece of advice is to do the research early enough so that you can use the findings to inform your interpretation. This takes planning and preparation.

eg

→ Museum A

The museum realises it will always struggle to know how to connect with its target audience of young women. So it decides to invite the local art and design college to work on the project. The students are shown the collections in the stores and then asked to prepare presentations to the museum, as if pitching for the exhibition contract. This throws up some excellent ideas (and some outrageous ones too).



→ → Museum B

The museum decides that a project which brings together different generations - grandparents and grandchildren - would make a good contribution to community life. It invites a local pensioners group to spend a day at the museum. They discuss their interests in local history, what museums are for and how they like to spend time with their grandchildren. They look at some of the photographs from the archive. The museum records a lot of valuable information and, just as usefully, everyone's imagination is fired with ideas.



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Making it Happen

Getting there

Following your interpretive planning work, you should have a series of statements showing that you

- know your underlying reasons for developing the interpretation
- have defined and researched the subject to be covered by this particular piece of interpretation
- have a clear sense of who you are communicating with.

Hopefully, you will now find it easier to decide which of the two main approaches to interpretation - themes or exploration (or perhaps a mix of the two) - best suits what you are trying to do.

eg

→ Museum A

The museum decides that its theme is that historical objects can inspire modern design. It will encourage its target audience to visit the museum and use the collections as inspiration for design projects. →

→ → Museum B

The museum decides its theme will be that everybody has special histories they can pass on in their family. It will encourage grandparents to use photographs to talk about their own childhood with their grandchildren. → →

Suggestions

Whichever approach you choose, you still have to make it work. So far, you have simply, though importantly, clarified your intentions. **What follows are some suggestions for how you can develop your ideas in a way that engages your visitors.** These ideas have been selected from various practical guides to interpretation. Note that we are still not yet discussing what interpretive media might suit your needs. Most of the suggestions listed here could be applied to several different types of interpretive media. Many of the suggestions relate back to the idea that people have different learning styles and that you need to think how you provide opportunities for relating to your interpretation.

Stimulate the senses

How might you encourage visitors to use their five senses - sight, hearing, smell, touch or taste - to grasp your theme or to explore the evidence? This helps you to consider the needs of people whose senses are impaired. In fact, most visitors enjoy the chance to use a combination of senses.

Encourage inspection

Can you provoke your visitor to look more closely at the display? This is particularly important if an object, rather than a broad subject or issue, is the focus of the interpretation. Prompt them to look at an important detail or unusual feature. Then relate it to your theme or invite them to consider the evidence of why this feature is significant.

Compare and contrast

Can you compare your theme, or the evidence you are presenting, to ideas and experiences that are familiar or important to your visitor? The comparison might convey factual information such as the scale of an object or the length of an event or it might relate to needs we all share for love, security or freedom of expression.

Tap into emotion

How can you convey the emotion that is inherent in your theme or evidence? It is often said that interpretation should be fun. Clearly, however, museums deal with many subjects that are very serious. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the interpretation should have a tone that is in keeping with the emotions of the theme or evidence.

Interaction

It is also often said that interpretation must be interactive. This reflects the key idea that different people like to learn in different ways. Interaction - whether this means computers, play areas, or workshops - gives visitors a chance to use a different set of skills. Sometimes, the enjoyment of applying the skill is more important to the visitor than the sense they make of the activity. This is not inherently 'wrong': you must decide whether this is consistent with the intentions you develop through your interpretive planning.



Social interaction

Interaction between people is often a very effective and enjoyable way to encourage learning. It may be between staff or volunteers and visitors. Or it might be among visitors themselves, especially among the friends and family that are visiting together. Interpretation can be devised to encourage all these types of interaction, often in a subtle and unobtrusive way.

Getting creative

It would be impossible (and absurd) to try to include all these suggestions in any one piece of interpretation. But giving them some consideration can help to tease some imaginative ideas from the research and thinking involved in the first steps of interpretive planning.

It is important that you begin to think creatively about how you are going to interpret your subject. Visitors often respond positively to a spark of originality, an unusual approach or a personal flourish that helps them look at your subject in a new light. Again, discussing ideas with colleagues - even friends or family - can be helpful to free up your mind in order to come up with good ideas and throw out bad ones.

Choosing your media

The list of interpretive media is probably endless. In fact, the most effective media are sometimes variations that have been adapted just to suit particular circumstances. Nevertheless, it is worth listing some of the most widely used media to indicate the range at your disposal:

- audio-visual programme
- guided tour
- demonstration
- workshops
- leaflet
- graphic panel
- models
- computer programme
- audio guide
- replicas and reconstructions
- dioramas
- handling collections.

You will see that some media are delivered in person (guided tours, demonstrations, workshops). Others are not. Generally speaking, personal interpretation is the most effective form of communication if the person has good communication skills, and is enthusiastic and informed about the theme of the interpretation. Some media (audio-visual programmes, talks) give you control over the sequence or duration of the interpretation. Others (some computers, room guides) give your visitor more control over how they use the interpretation.

After all that pondering about interpretive planning, however, it is quite likely that you will have developed some ideas about what form your interpretation should take. The following list is not designed to guide you to the perfect media. Hopefully, you will be guided by your own imagination and creativity. Instead, use the list to test whether your ideas are practical or whether there is some reason why the media might not suit your circumstances.

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- ✓ Some media, for example computers and simple notices, are relatively easy to change and update, perhaps even re-use for other interpretation. Others (audio-visual programmes) are hard to change once they have been installed.
- ✓ A rota of tour guides is time consuming to manage. Other media are simple to look after once they have been installed.
- ✓ Demonstrations can be tailored for different audiences. Other media have a fixed format that cannot be adapted.
- ✓ Reconstructions are relatively expensive to set up. Other media are relatively costly to maintain (any that involve employing people or that require specialist support).
- ✓ You can produce some media yourself, depending on your skills. For others you will need to employ designers and fabricators.
- ✓ Some can be introduced quite quickly. Others take time to research and develop.

As with many of the steps involved in planning your interpretation, it may be useful to write down your conclusions about the media you intend to employ. Restate the themes, learning skills and target audiences that each medium will be concerned with. Again, this helps everyone - you, your colleagues, funders, designers - to be clear about what you are seeking to do with the interpretation. It will also help you make decisions when more practical matters - such as cost or space - are forcing you to make choices about which media to use.

Do-it-yourself?

Many smaller museums cannot afford to commission designers and must produce their interpretation themselves. In this, they must apply the same resourcefulness that they use in other areas of museum work.

Inexpensive interpretation can be extremely effective if the ideas behind it are imaginative and stimulating. If you use materials that are not very hardwearing, make sure you replace the interpretation regularly so that it looks fresh.

Try to find volunteers who have good practical and creative skills. They will be worth their weight in gold. If you use volunteer guides, develop some training and guidance notes for them so that they know what you want them to convey through their tours and how they can do this best.

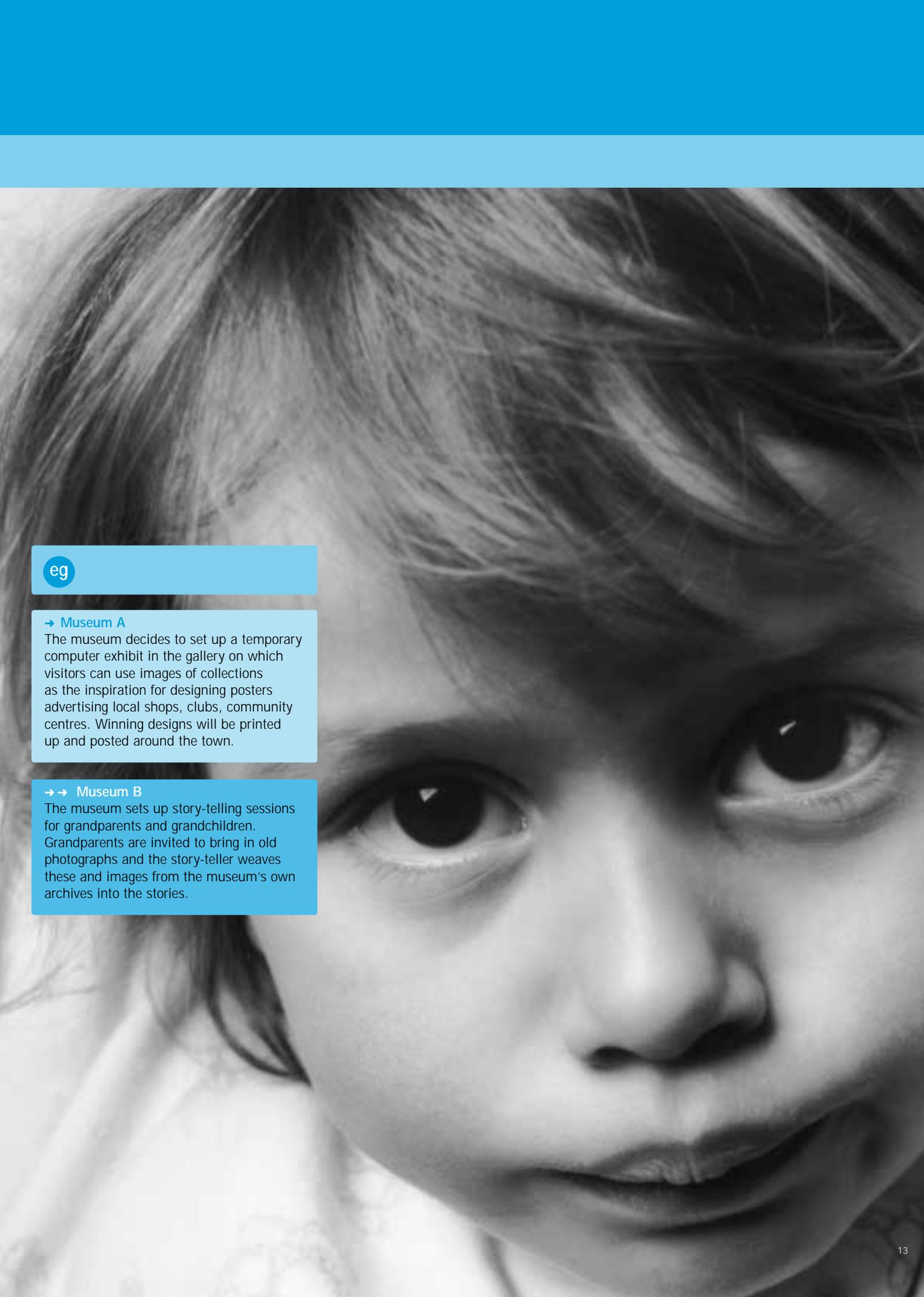
Working with designers

Other museums will want to work with a designer or manufacturer to develop their interpretation. Most designers specialise in specific media such as graphic design, audio-visual or computers. This is why you should decide for yourself what media you need, rather than be led by a designer who may only be able to work with certain media.

The creation of most media involves three elements, all of which may cost you money:

- the raw materials: illustrations, photographs, text, soundtrack
- bringing these together into a design that meets your brief
- getting the design produced or constructed.

If you have followed the various steps in these guidelines, you should have the basis for a brief for your designer. Ask them to explain the production process. You need to have some understanding of this to know when and how you can ask for changes. If you cannot understand their explanation, they may not be the right people for you to work with.



eg

→ **Museum A**

The museum decides to set up a temporary computer exhibit in the gallery on which visitors can use images of collections as the inspiration for designing posters advertising local shops, clubs, community centres. Winning designs will be printed up and posted around the town.

→ → **Museum B**

The museum sets up story-telling sessions for grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents are invited to bring in old photographs and the story-teller weaves these and images from the museum's own archives into the stories.



Looking Back, Looking Forward

Evaluation

Many people feel a little daunted by the prospect of evaluating their interpretation - where do you start with all those questionnaires, interviews and statistics? These guidelines do not try to provide a step-by-step guide to evaluation. A good way to start is to arm yourself with a readable manual and, if possible, find a sympathetic person who can guide you through the process first time round. What this section does do is encourage you to think why it is important to evaluate your interpretation.

With all the theory surrounding evaluation, it may help to ask yourself a very practical question: **how will I actually use the findings?**



The results from evaluation can help you in a number of ways. They can:

- tell you whether your interpretation does what you want it to do
- help you to improve your interpretation
- furnish you with information to show your governing and funding bodies that your interpretation is effective
- indicate to your governing and funding bodies that the quality of your interpretation matters to you
- give you confidence that what you are doing is working.

Evaluation can be time consuming. That time is likely to be wasted if you do not know how you want to use the results. This leads to a second very practical question: **how much time can I realistically afford to spend on evaluation?**

It is sensible to allow yourself a fixed amount of time in which to carry out your evaluation. Otherwise the research can take so long that you can be sure that it will not seem worth the effort. If you can answer these two questions, you give yourself a good chance of discovering how evaluation can make a very constructive contribution to your interpretation.

A final point that can deter people from carrying out interpretation is that they worry their results will not be accurate or reliable enough. Your text book and mentor are needed here to help you see how evaluation can never be perfectly accurate - there are just different types and degrees of inaccuracy.

If you find this hard to understand at first, you may be surprised how intuitively you see what this means once your results start coming in. Then you can see that evaluation is just another tool at your disposal. In fact, many people are surprised by how stimulating they find the results of evaluation. The process can be a great motivation to try to improve your interpretation.



Evaluation - when to start?

This depends on what question you are asking. You can carry out evaluation at three different stages in the development of interpretation.

Is it working?

Perhaps the classic evaluation is carried out after the interpretation has been completed and tries to establish whether it communicates as you intended. This means, of course, that you must have had clear intentions in the first place. The early sections of these guidelines should help you to be clear about what you are trying to convey through your interpretation.

If done successfully, this type of evaluation can provide valuable evidence of how well you are doing. A problem is that if it shows up any failings in the interpretation, it can be too late to make any corrections or changes. You are stuck with knowing that your interpretation is not working.

Would this work?



For this reason, it can be more useful to test your interpretation half-way through its production. By testing an early version on your target audience, you can learn lessons that can be incorporated in the final version.

What would work?

Following this thinking to its conclusion, the most efficient use of your time might be to find out as much as you can at the start about what would work best for your target audience. This means, in effect, doing the sort of research into your audience that we described earlier in these guidelines.

Although evaluation has many benefits, perhaps the key reason to evaluate your interpretation is so that you can improve it. So the test of whether your evaluation has been worthwhile is whether you actually use the findings to make a practical improvement to your interpretation.

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE